

At the Beginning and the End: Two "Memorable" Activities

By Susan L. Schwartz

A scavenger hunt can help students remember information at the beginning of their program, and producing a yearbook can provide students with a souvenir to help them remember their time together. I believe that teachers in language schools or training programs can adapt both activities to fit their particular contexts.

The first activity, a scavenger hunt, requires people to work in small groups to find answers to a set of questions. People have to walk to different places within a prescribed area to discover the answers, and there is a time limit in which to complete the activity. All answers are written on a handout that lists the questions; there is one handout per group. An element of competition is included because the group that gets the most correct answers wins a prize.

Teachers can conduct a scavenger hunt with their students to present them with information in a fun way. There is always a great deal of information to disseminate to students enrolled in language schools or participating in training programs, and sometimes it is hard for them to remember all the important details when they begin their course of study. Information which is provided to students through their participation in activities, rather than just on a handout, may have a more memorable impact.

The second activity is to produce a yearbook. When a course ends and it is time to say goodbye to my students, I always feel sad. Although I have photos of many of my students, I want something more than that to remind me of the good times we shared together. A yearbook is exactly the memento that I want.

In the spring of 1996, I worked with a group of Chinese teachers of English participating in the College English Teacher Training (CETT) Program at Nanjing University, where I first tried these activities.

Organizing the Scavenger Hunt

For the scavenger hunt, I wrote ten questions designed to elicit information about the CETT Program, the Nanjing University campus, and the department with which the CETT Program is affiliated. For example, I asked students to find out the following: Where is the CETT Program office? What floor in the Main Library is the English Language Reading Room on and when is it open? Who is Mr. Huang, and what does he do? Find the message in Susan's mailbox and write down what it says. (It was my apartment and telephone numbers.)

I divided the 26 students into six groups and told them the rules for the activity. They had 45 minutes to walk around the campus to find the answers and return to the classroom. The members of each group had to stay together at all times; they could not split up to find the answers. Also, the students had to use English as much as possible while they were searching for the answers to the questions. The first group to return with the most correct answers would win a prize. To provide more of an incentive, I did not say what the prize would be.

When the time was up and all the groups had come back to the classroom, we went over the answers. I had allocated only 15 minutes, which was not enough time to hear each group's responses. (I would suggest allowing half an hour for ten questions. And one hour to do the activity would give students more time to find the answers.) Then, I awarded the prize to the winning group-a watermelon. I chose something which was inexpensive and could be shared among all the students because I wanted to create unity, not divisiveness.

To ensure that the students realized the positive results of the scavenger hunt, I asked them what they had gotten out of the activity. In addition to the specific information they learned, the class came to realize (with some leading questions) that they had achieved the following through the activity. First, the scavenger hunt was a good way for students to meet each other. When I divided them into groups, I organized the class so that there was a geographical mix and that the four men were all in different groups. The scavenger hunt also introduced the students to small group work-an integral part of the CETT Program. The hunt fostered cooperation among the group members since they had to work together to achieve a common goal. It also promoted the idea that students must take responsibility for their own learning. The students had to ask questions to find the answers, and they could not be passive learners if they wanted to be successful. Finally, a scavenger hunt is a typical American activity (it is often done at children's summer camps), so there was a cultural element involved as well.

Producing the Yearbook: Preliminary Steps

Producing a yearbook is also a typical American activity. High schools and colleges have clubs for students who want to help create yearbooks to celebrate the passing of the school year. Under the guidance of an advisor, students meet regularly to work on the design of the yearbook. In the U.S., high school and college yearbooks are produced professionally and are purchased by the students. They have hardback covers, glossy pages, color photos, and often contain advertising.

It was not feasible to produce that kind of yearbook for the CETT Program. Even if I had my own college yearbook with me, I would not have shown it to the students because I would not want them to feel that what they would create would be only a pale imitation of the real thing. We could only make photocopies for our yearbook, which would be distributed for free, and I wanted the students to be proud of their work. I also did not want them to think they had to follow the format in an American yearbook-I wanted the students to create a unique CETT Program yearbook.

The first step in the process was to organize a yearbook committee. I explained in general terms what producing a yearbook involved and asked for volunteers to form the yearbook committee.

Six students expressed interest; for a group of 26, that was an optimum size. Larger classes may need more people, smaller classes fewer, but I think that any student who wants to participate should be able to. The project should begin about six to eight weeks before completion so that the students and teacher are not overwhelmed with work as the program draws to a close.

I next met with the yearbook committee and explained that I was merely an advisor; they were the ones who would make the decisions. The committee had to decide what to include, how to divide the tasks among themselves, how to organize the layout of material, and what the deadlines should be for completing the tasks. I gave the students suggestions on what they could include and after much discussion among committee members and with the whole group of CETT participants, they came up with a format for their yearbook. Some of my suggestions were adopted and others were not, and some ideas proposed by students were included instead.

The Sections of the Yearbook

All the students wanted individual photos of themselves in the yearbook. They also wanted photos of their instructors. One committee member was in charge of collecting photos from the students. I collected the instructors' photos. Black and white photos are better for photocopying, but some students had color photos only. They decided not to take pictures of each other especially for the yearbook, although I think that doing so would have ensured better quality photos. Blank spaces were left around each photo so people could write personal messages next to their picture.

I suggested that all the students write something about their time in the CETT Program, and several students took responsibility for this section. They distributed small, blank pieces of paper, about the size of 3" x 5" index cards, and told people to write or draw on one side only. This guaranteed that all submissions took up the same amount of space in the yearbook, and it also helped the students focus on what to write by giving them a limited amount of space to write in. Students could write a paragraph or a poem or draw a picture to describe what the CETT Program meant to them. About half the students wrote entirely in English and half wrote entirely in Chinese, while a few used both languages. Instructors in the CETT Program were asked to write something too.

I had mixed feelings about the use of Chinese. While it meant that I could not read a lot of what the students wrote, many students indicated that they could not express their sentiments well enough in English. Since the yearbook was a souvenir for them as well as for me, I did not insist on using only English. Next time, though, I think I will insist they use English only for these submissions because they will have the chance to write in Chinese in the photo section of the yearbook.

Another of my suggestions that the students liked was to include a page of "amazing adjectives." The yearbook committee member in charge of this section wrote the names of all the students on slips of paper, and then had each student choose a name. That person had to think of three adjectives to describe the student whose name was on the slip of paper. But all the adjectives had

to begin with the first letter of the student's English name. The committee member collected all the descriptions and then wrote them in list form on one page.

After all the material had been collected, the yearbook committee met to decide upon the layout of the yearbook. They had to decide not only the order of the sections but also how to arrange the photos and the written submissions on the pages. I made some recommendations but left the final design to the students. All the material was glued to standard-sized sheets of paper for photocopying. The committee decided to put the instructors' pictures first and then include their own photos; three or four photos were put on each page in various positions. Lines were drawn dividing each page into thirds or quarters so students could easily see where to write their comments. The page of adjectives was placed next. The written submissions followed. Three or four were glued to a page, and they all faced the same direction so it would be easy to read them. On my own, and without telling the yearbook committee in advance, I inserted one page at the end on which I had drawn a picture and had written a message thanking the committee members for all their work. There were 23 pages and a cover designed by one of the students.

Finally the yearbook was ready to be photocopied. Since it was a class project, I was able to use the copy machine in our department. I made one copy for each student and instructor, plus a few extra copies. In fact, two students lost theirs, so I was glad to have the extras available. The yearbook committee collated and stapled each copy together. Then the yearbooks were distributed to the students and instructors.

Signing the Yearbooks

Producing the yearbook was just the first part of the activity. In the week that followed, every spare moment was spent signing them-all the students wanted all their classmates and instructors to write something in their yearbooks. It worked like this: One person would take her yearbook to another person and ask that person to sign it. The person who was asked would find his/her photo in the requester's yearbook and then write something in the space provided. Each person's photo had blank space demarcated around it. In this way, everyone could obtain comments from every other person involved in the CETT Program. Since each comment was written near the picture of the writer, the reader would have a visual reminder of the writer as well. Comments were written in both English and Chinese.

It was easy for my students to use their spare time to sign yearbooks because most of them lived in a dormitory on campus and saw each other out of class. Teachers of students who do not live together may want to arrange a specific time to sign yearbooks. They could have a yearbook-signing party or set aside time in class.

There were many benefits of this activity. Besides producing a nice souvenir, students learned something about U.S. culture. Students also got practice in writing and in expressing their feelings. Some students learned new vocabulary words from the page of adjectives. Yearbook committee members practiced their oral communication, cooperation, and decision-making skills. Artistically-inclined students had the chance to demonstrate their talent. And by the end of the project, everyone knew how to produce a yearbook.

Final Thoughts

Both the scavenger hunt and the yearbook activities promote group spirit. Both activities offer students the opportunity to use English for real communication purposes and include an element of U.S. culture as well. Conducting a scavenger hunt and producing a yearbook are two "memorable" activities which many EFL teachers can adapt and use with their own students.

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